Chapter 6
Marginalised groups

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses some of the most vulnerable groups, whose views and needs should be taken into account in risk reduction projects. It looks at four groups – people marginalised by:

- gender;
- age (the young and old);
- ethnicity or ‘foreignness’ (including migrants and travellers); and
- disability.

Of these, only gender has been studied in any detail, and then only recently. More research is needed, on these and other factors making particular groups vulnerable, such as political and religious affiliation.

6.2 Gender

The literature on gender and disasters has grown considerably since the mid-1990s. There are now several useful general surveys of the issues, some of which are drawn on here.¹

6.2.1 Gender and vulnerability

The impact of disasters on women can be very different from the impact on men. In general, disasters hit women harder. One study of the cyclone that killed 138,000 people in Bangladesh in April 1991 found that mortality amongst females over ten years of age was three times as high as amongst males of the same age.² In the Maharashtra earthquake in India in 1993, women made up 48% of those affected, but 55% of fatalities.³ Strategies for surviving food shortage may give priority to men over women (and to adults over children and old people) in the amount of food eaten.

Yet it is not always women who are hit hardest. Men who have to work away from the home may be more vulnerable to certain kinds of hazard: for example, deaths from cyclones are often particularly high among those who go fishing at sea.
Why do some disasters affect women particularly badly? In the Bangladesh example, a number of factors were probably at work. Women’s physical size, strength and endurance were generally less than that of men. They may have been slowed down by clothing and children. They were probably more reluctant to venture far from their homes on their own and to be crowded into a cyclone shelter with men and strangers, and so may have delayed leaving for places of safety until it was too late. In the case of Maharashtra, female mortality rates were higher because the earthquake struck at night, when many men were sleeping outside because of the heat, but women, because of cultural constraints, slept indoors.

These are the immediate causes of women’s vulnerability. The root causes lie in women’s position in society. There is a heavy economic and social burden on women, especially poor women. First, they have a ‘productive’ role: supporting the household economically by productive work such as farming. Then they have a ‘reproductive’ role: carrying out a host of domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, rearing children and caring for other family members. Finally, they have a role in community tasks, such as joining with other women to ensure that scarce water supplies are shared equally.

Compared to men, women’s access to education, resources and income-earning opportunities is limited. Decision-making is still largely under male control, be it about the division of household labour and control of household assets, the resolution of community problems or benefiting from official development and relief programmes. In many places, traditions and cultural taboos prevent women from travelling far from their homes without their husbands. In some societies, widows are shunned.

Disasters can accentuate such vulnerabilities. During long-running crises, women’s workloads may increase as they are often left in charge of house-
holds because their menfolk have to migrate in search of work. Even in rapid-onset disasters, women are expected to carry out their normal domestic tasks, but in more difficult conditions, in addition to dealing with the consequences of the disaster itself. After disasters, women’s bargaining position may be weakened during competition for relief aid and other scarce resources: single women and woman-headed households are particularly likely to lose out. Relief agencies easily lose their gender sensitivity during emergencies, amid pressures to deliver aid quickly in chaotic conditions. Many relief and rehabilitation operations target male heads of households. Jobs and training in recovery projects tend to be provided mainly for men – although women are often expected to work as labourers in reconstruction.

There is evidence that increased economic and psychological stress in disaster-affected families leads to a rise in domestic violence against women. There were signs of this in Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and it has been documented on many occasions in North America. It can also lead to men abandoning their families, as was widely reported in the famines in Bengal in 1943, Bangladesh in 1974 and Malawi in the 1970s.

Participatory methods of vulnerability analysis (see Chapter 4) should identify such gender issues. Special care should be taken to ensure that women’s voices are heard: women are aware of their vulnerability and the forces that create it (see Case Study 6.1).

6.2.2 Building on women's capacities

Awareness of gender issues is standard in development and relief programmes – or should be: it is certainly almost impossible to obtain funding without demonstrating some awareness of these issues. Few agencies are without gender policies or stated commitments to gender equity, even if it may be difficult to put such ideals into practice.

By contrast, disaster mitigation and preparedness programmers have been slow to adopt a gender perspective, and their awareness of gender issues remains relatively limited. This is partly because gender did not feature much in disaster literature before the mid-1990s, partly because the traditional technocratic bias in many disaster management organisations has allowed little room for considering social issues, and partly because such organisations are staffed mostly by men.

Most agencies working on risk reduction pay some attention to gender issues, but often not in a systematic manner. Recognition of the different vulnerabilities of men and women is common, but there is relatively little understanding of how
to address this. Many interventions focus on the most visible symptoms of women's vulnerability, and fail to look at underlying problems. For instance, risk reduction programmes may seek to ensure that women take part in training courses and community volunteering schemes, but are less likely to look at ways of getting more women into leadership positions in those programmes and in their communities. It is still possible to find project plans that do not mention gender at all, even in supposedly community-based initiatives.

Case Study 6.1
Women's analysis of their vulnerability in urban and rural Gujarat

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India helps its 220,000 members to build more secure and sustainable livelihoods. It has used a method known as Participatory Evaluation Writing (PEW), which allows women to present their views of their vulnerability to natural and man-made hazards. The aim is to find new tools for participatory evaluation and assessment by the local stakeholders – the poor – and to 'democratise' evaluation writing.

Each PEW exercise goes through a cycle:
- focus group meetings of 10–15 participants;
- joint preparation of PEW manuals;
- two- to three-day PEW sessions with 10–15 people and facilitators;
- one-day sessions to select the final material; and
- completion of the final text (edited by outsiders but agreed by PEW participants in a separate session).

PEW has been used to help poor women from urban and rural districts in Gujarat to explain the causes of their vulnerability, the strengths and weaknesses of their coping strategies and the value of external interventions. The process showed that these women had a sophisticated view of their vulnerability as the product of a variety of deprivations and emerging conditions. Consequently, their attempts to reduce vulnerability emphasised improvements in different aspects of their lives and livelihoods.

Women’s resilience and skills in coping with crisis make up a valuable resource that is under-utilised by field agencies. Women’s efforts in producing and selling goods and as wage earners are central to household livelihoods – an important point that most organisations working on disasters have yet to appreciate. More and more women are acting as heads of household where their husbands have migrated to find work elsewhere or abandoned them. They are experienced in looking after others and often take on informal disaster management roles within their communities: managing food and water supplies during drought, for instance, or looking after people who have been injured or displaced by disasters. Research in developed and developing countries suggests that, after disasters, women are much more likely to seek support from informal structures – other women and their kinship groups – than from officials. Such roles and informal structures are often invisible to outsiders.

Women also possess considerable technical knowledge and skills that can be important for disaster mitigation. They are often expert in traditional farming practices, such as soil conservation and inter-cropping, which can reduce the damage caused by drought or sudden rainfall. Many women in Africa know a great deal about traditional drought-resistant seed varieties and how to use them, and about roots, fruits and other food growing in the wild that families can turn to when crops fail. They know how to preserve food for use during the hungry season or more prolonged periods of scarcity: in Sudan, for instance, women are known to have invented 90 different dried and fermented foods, based on crops such as sorghum and millet, wild plants and meat from wild and domestic animals. Women are often expert in home health care, and knowledgeable about traditional medicines. They are likely to be responsible for keeping drinking water clean, and in some societies for building and maintaining houses.

Agencies need to recognise such capacities and build upon them. This can be very effective. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, a number of successful drought mitigation programmes have drawn on women farmers’ and gardeners’ knowledge of how to preserve traditional drought-resistant seed varieties and grow crops from them. In many places, disaster preparedness programmes have trained women as first-aiders, building on their customary role in giving health care. However, there are both practical and ‘political’ challenges to ensuring that women are adequately represented in risk reduction programmes, and are reached by such programmes.

One of the most immediate practical challenges is to make sure that risk reduction measures fit with a woman’s busy working day. Training courses should be held at times of the day when women are most likely to be free from domestic and other tasks. Child care facilities may be needed to encourage
attendance. In communities where women have little or no education or experience of taking part in formal group discussions, special attention to the training approach is needed.

Even where women acquire valuable knowledge and skills as a result of training, social constraints may not offer them the opportunity to use them fully. ActionAid found that giving first aid training to women living in cyclone-prone areas of Bangladesh gave them more confidence in dealing with potential crises, but there was no visible evidence that it was influencing women's position in the community, and their participation in local disaster management committees remained limited. Strong cultural conservatism locally may have been an important influence.

Methods of raising awareness of risk and transmitting early warnings are other areas needing attention. Women tend to acquire a good deal of information through informal methods, such as conversations with their neighbours when working in the fields or collecting water and fodder. More formal systems for disseminating information, such as broadcasts, leaflets or public meetings, may not reach them. For instance, in parts of Africa it has been found that transmitting climate forecasts by radio suits male farmers, who can find time to listen, better than it does women. Women farmers cannot schedule a regular time to listen to the radio. They prefer information to be made available through agricultural extension officers or in schools, so that they can ask questions and discuss it.

6.2.3 Disasters and women's empowerment

The main 'political' challenge is to ensure that women's views are properly represented in project planning and implementation – before, during and after a disaster – and from this foundation to tackle both the immediate and root causes of their vulnerability. Participatory methods provide the practical tools for giving women a voice but, given that the root causes of female vulnerability are often to be found in the social structures or customs that create gender inequality, there is clearly a potential political problem in attempting to empower women, and a significant risk that initiatives may alienate men and traditional leaders.

There are many examples from development programmes of backlashes against women who have been encouraged to speak out in public: women being beaten by their husbands for spending time at community meetings instead of on housework, and older women giving younger women extra domestic chores to stop them going out to meetings or training courses. Such problems can often be overcome through discussions in advance with poten-
Case Study 6.2
Building women's confidence

For many years, the Bangladesh Red Crescent has managed a cyclone preparedness programme which, in recent times, has taken on an increasingly community-based character. In the Cox’s Bazaar district, on the coast, women have been trained to take part in local disaster preparedness committees responsible for maintaining cyclone shelters and transmitting warnings. This disaster preparedness work has been supplemented by supporting the women more widely in their everyday lives through education and training in reproductive health, organising self-help groups and running small enterprises.

As a result, women are playing a more active role in the committees. One, 40-year-old Shoba Ranishli, exemplifies the increased confidence that their involvement has given them:

women definitely have to be involved in disaster preparedness, because women can then teach other women; men are not teaching women! In general, women can transport messages better, because they have access to more people than men, like to the elderly, to other women and of course to the children... the preparation for a cyclone at the household level is our work and responsibility. Men tell what should be done at the household without taking action themselves. But women just do it, we are more practical. Am I not correct?


Strategic opponents such as village elders, religious leaders, husbands and mothers-in-law, although a good deal of time and persuasion may be needed.

Nevertheless, disasters, by upsetting social norms, can become opportunities for addressing deeper social problems and conflicts. As well as presenting new income-earning opportunities, women’s involvement in relief and rehabilitation projects can improve their standing in the community, especially where they take on new roles and responsibilities. It can certainly boost their confidence (see Case Study 6.2).

Women’s groups formed to respond to disasters can become a resource for longer-term community development, and for future risk reduction activities.
Development and emergency organisations can do much to help such groups build their capacity by giving technical, institutional, financial and moral support, provided that this is sensitive to the nature of local society and social structures.

Organisations involved in disaster recovery can also take advantage of the temporary weakening of social constraints to press for more fundamental changes in gender relationships, notably those that increase women’s control over basic assets such as food, cash and property (see Case Study 6.3).

Case Study 6.3
Women’s empowerment through rehabilitation

Pakistan
In 1992, Pakistan experienced severe floods. In the Punjab, 1.7m acres of land were laid waste and over 8,000 cows killed. In response, Oxfam created a new local NGO, PATTAN, to support relief and rehabilitation work. PATTAN sought to develop new institutional structures that would enable all members of the community to reduce their vulnerability, strengthening women’s capacities in particular.

The steps taken included the employment of women relief workers, distribution of food by local women and registering women as heads of household to receive food for their families. Women were also involved in designing and building new houses.

Other innovations were more radical. PATTAN helped women to set up their own village organisations because they were barred from the general village organisations. Normally, this step might have met resistance, but amidst the post-flood disruption, villagers were dependent on PATTAN’s support and respected its involvement.

PATTAN also introduced the concept of joint ownership of houses by husband and wife. It took many meetings with men and women before the concept was accepted. Joint ownership gave women a greater sense of security, and there were indications that it reduced domestic conflict. As a result of these initiatives, women began to take action collectively in other projects.


(continued)
India
After the earthquake in Maharashtra in September 1993, the government, with support from the World Bank, began a major house repair and strengthening programme. It aimed to reach 200,000 households in 1,300 villages.

An NGO, Swayam Shiksan Prayog (SSP), was appointed to facilitate community participation after the limitations of the programme’s initially top-down approach became evident. SSP worked with local women’s organisations, known as mahila mandals, which had not been very active in the past, but became key players in the reconstruction.

The first stage was to hold meetings with 500 mahila mandals and convince the women that they had a role in building – they had previously considered it a male domain. The next stage was to train groups in surveying, house design and supervising construction. They were encouraged to attend village assemblies, and taken to meet government administrators.

As a result, women took up leadership roles in their villages for the first time. They went from door to door to explain construction techniques, suggested appropriate actions (e.g. regarding house design and the choice and collective purchasing of building materials) and organised contacts between householders, engineers and masons. They negotiated support from village committees, held meetings with officials and organised visits to demonstration sites. Groups organised or facilitated the purchase of materials, and the contracting and supervision of builders. They helped communities to make applications for government grants. Problems were brought to the village assemblies for discussion.

There was opposition from men, village leaders, engineers and officials, but the women’s groups worked hard to build consensus, and their effectiveness as community mobilisers won them respect. They began to take a more active role in other development initiatives, including health, education, water and sanitation, and savings and credit.

6.3 Age

The specific needs of old and young people are often overlooked in disaster and development programmes. Both groups are highly vulnerable. Although casualty figures in disasters are often not broken down by age group, the evidence there is indicates that they are much more likely to suffer injury or lose their lives. For instance, research after the cyclone in Bangladesh in April 1991 showed that mortality was greatest among children under ten years, and women aged over 40 (for women, mortality levels increased sharply with age, reaching 40% among the over-60s). Another study of the same event showed death rates among people under 14 and 50 or over were more than three times higher than for those aged 15–49.7

Young and old people also have considerable capacities, and can play valuable roles in preparedness and mitigation.

6.3.1 Older people

Recognition of the needs of older people in emergencies is growing, thanks mainly to research and advocacy by HelpAge International. Generally, however, they remain invisible and marginalised, finding it hard to obtain adequate humanitarian relief and support for economic and social recovery. Aid agencies remain largely unaware of older people's needs, or tend to treat them as passive recipients of welfare rather than active members of society.

Vulnerability and capacity

Ageing makes people more vulnerable physically. Older people are frailer and less mobile. They are more likely to suffer from long-term health problems such as heart or respiratory illness, and from physical disabilities such as poor eyesight and hearing. These physical characteristics of ageing reduce older people's capacity to take action before and during emergencies: they may, for example, be unable to keep their houses properly maintained and hence more secure against hazards; or they may be unable to escape quickly enough to higher ground or shelters when floods or hurricanes threaten.

Socio-economic forces also create vulnerability among older people. Many live alone, isolated from family and community support structures. Lack of education and conservative attitudes may limit their capacity to take independent action. Older women, for instance, may be more likely than younger ones to adhere to social or religious customs that discourage them from going far from the house on their own.
On the other hand, older people do not lack capacities. They are economically and socially active – an important point that is usually overlooked by development and humanitarian organisations alike. They may have considerable knowledge of their environment and the hazards within it. They are more likely to have first-hand experience of previous disasters (especially those which occur infrequently, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions), together with knowledge of relevant coping strategies: for instance, knowledge of traditional drought-resistant seed varieties or fruit, nuts and roots growing in the wild that can be eaten at times of food scarcity. In this respect, they may be better at dealing with disasters than many younger people. They may well have been community leaders or held other positions of responsibility. Older women in particular are experienced in caring for children and the sick. It is not true that older people are necessarily difficult to train or unwilling to accept new ideas, and they are often keen to play an active role in their communities.8

Approaches to risk reduction

Risk reduction projects need to pay much more attention to such issues. Participatory approaches (see Chapter 8) are valuable in assessing older people’s vulnerabilities and capacities, and giving them a voice in disaster planning.

Relatively straightforward steps, such as making homes more secure or making plans for evacuating older people well ahead of impending floods or hurricanes, can be very effective. Nisadu, a grass-roots organisation in the Indian state of Orissa, set up a scheme in which young people looked after elders when danger threatened: 48 hours before the cyclone of October 1999, the young people helped the older ones to places of safety; there was not a single fatality when the cyclone struck.9

Older people’s knowledge, skills and experience can be put to good use in disaster mitigation and response, even in difficult operating environments. For example, humanitarian assistance projects implemented by HelpAge International in Sudan have seen older people put in charge of assessing vulnerability and distributing food and other relief aid, and of construction of shelters and water pumps for people displaced by conflict.10

Because singling out older people for special attention can lead to resentment among other members of the community, projects should find ways of helping them to make a greater contribution to their families and communities. This not only brings material benefits for the older people concerned, but can also improve their status (see Case Study 6.4).
The village of Lhate, in Mozambique’s Gaza Province, was cut off by the floods of February–March 2000. Older people living in the area – 97 of them – formed an association of elders to grow food for themselves and their community. HelpAge International gave them oxen to plough the fields, as well as tools and seeds.

The help of younger people was needed to prepare and plant the fields, so the older women offered in return to help the younger ones with their household chores, such as cooking and looking after children. According to a village elder, Mrs Matusse, this had more than material benefits: ‘By doing this,’ she said, ‘we have also avoided our older people being accused of witchcraft … Because we are gaining the trust and respect of the young ones through our contribution and the food we are producing for the community, they are less likely to accuse and blame us when things go wrong.’

In Chokwe, another flood-affected province, HelpAge International and a local partner NGO, Vukoxa, supported a volunteer-based home visiting programme in eight villages covering older people and those who were sick or disabled. The home visitors were expected to raise awareness of ageing issues in the community, give practical support and undertake counselling.

The home visitors, who called themselves vaingeseli (the listeners) and included many older people, were selected by the community. They were trained to understand how ageing takes place and how it changes people’s needs, to identify signs of older people’s vulnerability, and to listen to, understand and record problems and methods of solving them. They were issued with bicycles to travel to villages, and received a modest gift in the form of household items such as salt, sugar and soap.

By October 2000, 35 vaingeseli had been trained and were caring for nearly 200 people. The project appeared to be helping to change attitudes towards older people, and there were signs that the initiative was encouraging older people to become more involved in community discussions.

6.3.2 Children and young people

Although much attention has been paid to the needs of children in emergencies, especially in conflicts, less thought has been given to ways of reducing their vulnerability to potential disasters. There is relatively little coverage in disaster literature.11

Disaster management guidelines and manuals usually start from the position that interventions to help children are best made through the 'primary caregiv-ers' – i.e. parents or guardians. In the literature generally, women and children are usually discussed together as a combined category of people. This is logical, for several reasons.

- First, children can be very, even totally, dependent on their parents, according to their age, strength, skills, or maturity.
- Second, their daily routines are closely linked to those of adults in the household, and particularly to their mothers' work. Even quite young children help their mothers with important domestic and productive tasks.
- Third, the capacity of groups and individuals to deal with risk is greatly boosted by previous experience of disasters, from which coping strategies are learnt or knowledge of them is reinforced. Even though children and young people may have an extensive and close knowledge of their environment, which should not be overlooked, their lack of experience puts them at a disadvantage in the event of a disaster, when they will probably rely heavily on older generations for guidance.

However, much of the written material on 'women and children' overlooks any distinctiveness that there may be in the child's position.

Vulnerability

Many factors affect children's vulnerability to hazards. Nutritional deficiencies have a significant impact on the health of infants and young children in particular, as well as on their growth. Food shortages affect the health of pregnant women and foetuses, often leading to reduced birth weight – which puts babies at greater risk of ill health. Younger children are particularly likely to suffer from protein deficiency and malnutrition at times of famine. Undernourished lactating mothers are unable to breast-feed infants properly.

Children are particularly susceptible to pollutants, such as pesticides, lead and mercury, because they absorb more in relation to their total body
weight. Air and water pollution are major causes of illness among children in developing countries.

Children’s lack of physical strength and of practical skills such as being able to swim can prevent them from getting to places of safety during sudden-onset disasters. Where they spend a good deal of time in and around the home, they can be at greater risk from certain sudden-onset hazards such as earthquakes or landslides. Lack of literacy and other education limits their understanding of a potentially dangerous situation and how to prepare for or react to it. They may be in particular need of psychological or emotional support for dealing with a crisis, especially if they are on their own and cannot rely on older family members.

After a disaster, children are highly vulnerable, especially if they have lost parents or become separated from them. Emergency responses do not always recognise children’s particular dietary, material and emotional needs. Abuse and exploitation of children in such events is common. Poor families whose livelihoods have been wrecked by disasters often withdraw children from school to help in income-earning activities or in rebuilding homes.

Knowledge of traditional coping strategies is fundamental to understanding children’s vulnerabilities. In some cultures where drought is common, for example, women and children may be given preferential treatment when scarce food is shared, but in other cultures facing similar problems, they may not.

Other than in the area of nutrition, child-focused initiatives before disasters are rare. Preparedness and mitigation activities have tended either to be aimed at the whole community, or to concentrate on supporting mothers and carers. An example of the latter would be ensuring that women with children receive warning messages sufficiently early for them to move their families to safety.

Any intervention to support children cannot address their needs alone but must respond to those needs in the context of their family, community and culture. Agencies whose mandate is to work for children sometimes find it difficult to strike the right balance in their interventions, between concentrating on small groups of vulnerable children and more diffused targeting of communities in which those children live. Setting the balance in favour of the first approach has an impact on a needy group but reaches fewer people, while a shift towards the second reaches more people but risks spreading benefits too thinly. Tricky decisions of this kind have to be made in the light of local knowledge and experience.

The tendency to regard all children and young people as a single group should be resisted. Vulnerabilities and capacities will differ, influenced by age,
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gender, class, culture and other socio-economic factors. Identifying these differences is not easy, as so many factors are involved. A survey of a Guatemalan village hit by an earthquake in 1976, for example, showed that instead of the risk to children diminishing with age, as one would expect, the risk to the youngest child was less severe than that of the second youngest. The youngest child usually slept with its mother, who, it seemed, was able to protect it.12

Reducing risks to children

Some organisations involved in community-based projects give young people and children opportunities to present their own views of the risks they face. In most cases, they are encouraged to express themselves by drawing risk maps or other images of hazard and vulnerability. Children are very close to their environment and observe it acutely, so this approach can provide new insights to outsiders as well as helping to raise the children's own awareness.

For instance, drawings collected by the Palestine Red Crescent as part of its Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (described in Case Study 4.2, page 42) indicated that children were well aware of the threats facing the community, viewed disasters and their consequences as part of the broader environment, not as self-contained events, and were full of ideas for preparedness. The NGO Plan Viet Nam has drawn on children's knowledge of the local environment in designing a flood preparedness initiative.13

It is less clear if projects subsequently build on such activities to involve children more fully in their broader mitigation and preparedness work at community level, although this is the logical follow-up. In the US, where government agencies encourage each family to have its own disaster plan, the need to explain risks to children and discuss what they should do in an emergency is recognised. In El Salvador, young people are able to take on a more substantial role through the UNICEF-supported initiative Defensorías de los Derechos de la Niñez y Adolescencia (Defenders of Children's and Adolescents' Rights), where volunteers are trained to give psycho-social support to traumatised children and adults.14

Institutions such as schools, child care centres and nurseries can provide a focus for child-focused mitigation activity. Such activity can take both a physical or structural form, such as strengthening school buildings, and non-structural forms such as raising awareness of hazards and risks and promoting good practice in risk reduction through the curriculum (see Chapter 11.3.7, page 180).
One consequence of the 1999 Orissa cyclone was that many schoolbooks and other teaching materials were lost. UNICEF advocates preparedness measures on the part of educators to ensure that they can resume teaching as soon as possible after an emergency. These include making sure that reserve sets of textbooks and other teaching materials are kept in safe places.15

In many communities, schools serve more than one purpose. They may be community meeting places and public shelters during emergencies. In parts of Bangladesh and India, cyclone shelters double as schools or community centres during normal times. Children’s nurseries or kindergartens may grow food to supplement poor children’s diets; their capacity to do so can be supported during times of food shortage or crisis (see Case Study 6.5).

**Case Study 6.5**
**Greenhouses for nurseries and kindergartens**

Severe flooding in 1995–96 triggered an acute food shortage in North Korea, affecting an estimated five million people.

Children’s Aid Direct (CAD) supported agricultural production by nurseries and kindergartens in South Pyongan Province. These institutions had enough land for greenhouses, and all the food produced would go to the children, supplementing official rations.

During 1998, a CAD project built 254 100m² greenhouses. The frames were manufactured locally, but the high-quality plastic sheeting required had to be imported. The state seed company was persuaded to supply seeds at competitive prices, for distribution. In some places, local government contributed doors, ventilation windows and heating and irrigation systems. It was estimated that the greenhouses would be able to provide vegetables for 31,000 children in 340 nurseries, kindergartens and hospitals.

6.4 Disability

People with disabilities or ‘special needs’ are particularly vulnerable to many kinds of natural and man-made hazard. Yet there has been surprisingly little study of this subject.

Guidance on how to protect disabled people from the threat of disasters is limited, and most of the available material relates to developed countries. It is difficult to say much about good practice because it has not been documented – indeed, there may not be much to document. Disaster planning often overlooks the needs of people with disabilities, and disaster managers have limited or no contact with disabled people’s groups, or organisations working on their behalf. Until further research is done, only very general guidance can be given, and even this is tentative.

Anecdotal accounts illustrate the kinds of problem faced by disabled people in developing countries during disasters. There are stories of disabled people being left to drown during the 2000 floods in Zimbabwe and Mozambique: BBC TV news showed a man with mental health problems left chained to his bed. There is one tale of disabled members of a community in India who were put on the roofs of houses during a flood, while the rest of the community evacuated. Unfortunately, the local snakes also sought safety on the same roofs.

6.4.1 Disability and vulnerability

Disabilities are of many kinds, physical and mental, including impaired sight or hearing, lack of mobility, and difficulty in understanding or communicating. The extent of disability can vary considerably. The vulnerabilities arising from disability, though, are of two main kinds: physical and social.

A number of steps can be taken to deal with physical vulnerabilities. Many of these are simple and inexpensive. The first step is to identify the disabled, the nature of their disability and how this will increase their risks to known hazards. Further steps can then be taken to make them aware of the risks they face and how to deal with them, improve the security of their homes and workplaces, move them to safe places when severe hazards threaten, and attend to their specific needs after an emergency. The kinds of measure that may be required include:

- Methods for communicating risk and early warnings that are appropriate to the nature of the disability. Examples are printed material in large type or Braille for partially-sighted or blind people, sign language on television
broadcasts for the deaf, and face-to-face discussions with people who have learning difficulties or other health problems that may affect their understanding of messages. Field staff should be trained to communicate with disabled people effectively.

- Improvements to the physical environment that give greater protection and make evacuation easier. Emergency shelters should be accessible to disabled people, for instance. Homes, offices, escape routes and emergency facilities should be designed (or redesigned) with their needs in mind. Disaster preparedness plans need to appreciate that people with disabilities often require more time to make necessary preparations for an emergency and to move to a place of safety. Staff training will also be needed, in assisting disabled people and using relevant equipment.

Physical disability leads to economic and social vulnerability. Disabled people are often poor, without education, marginalised in society, misunderstood or avoided by neighbours, excluded from community structures, and either dependent on others or assumed to be so. Some specialists in disability and development issues believe that, because disabled people lack status in their communities, little effort is made by the community to save them from disasters. This problem of status is therefore a root cause of their vulnerability.

6.4.2 Supporting disabled people to reduce risk

The notion that disabled people are unable to help themselves and must be aided or directed by others is widespread, even among welfare services that work with them. Although some do indeed require considerable help, many have skills, experience and other capacities that can be utilised. Agency staff and community volunteers ought to be trained to support the independence and dignity of people with disabilities or impairments. At present, even those organisations that do try to provide special services tend to plan from the top down: for disabled people, but not with them.

Some disaster organisations in the US attempt to go beyond this directive model by encouraging the formation of ‘personal support’ (or ‘self-help’) networks: groups of people who agree to assist an individual with a disability in an emergency. These groups comprise three or more people known to the disabled person and trusted by them – family members, friends, neighbours and colleagues – who can be made aware of the person’s needs, work with them to make preparations for potential disasters, and assist them during crises.19

This collaborative approach should be taken further. Initiatives to reduce risk must be developed in partnership with disabled people and their organisa-
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6.5 Ethnicity and ‘foreignness’

Ethnicity, caste and other aspects of ‘foreignness’ – groups of people perceived by their neighbours to be different, such as migrants and refugees – are generally acknowledged to be important factors in determining vulnerability. Yet there is little guidance available on how to deal with these issues; the subject is scarcely mentioned in the literature on natural disaster mitigation, although it features strongly in writing on conflict and humanitarian crises.19

Case Study 6.6

Disabled people and disaster planning

The Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles in 1994 stimulated a more participatory approach to disaster/disability planning. A group was formed calling itself ‘Disabled People and Disaster Planning’. It met between 1996 and 1997 and came up with several recommendations for dealing with problems identified during and after the earthquake. These covered preparedness, management of emergency shelters, training of rescue workers, ways of assisting wheelchair users and communicating information to people with disabilities, making emergency shelters and services more accessible after a disaster, and sources of online information.

In Turkey, after the 1999 earthquakes, a non-governmental organisation set up a programme to support deaf people. A core group of deaf people were trained as disaster awareness instructors, with the plan that they should then travel the country giving training to others. By 2002, some 2,000 deaf people had been trained.

Minorities of all kinds are often more vulnerable to hazards than majority communities. This is due to social exclusion. Dominant groups have control over resources and political power, and tend to use these to their own advantage. The needs of minority ethnic groups are likely to be overlooked by decision-makers. So too are their capacities, including indigenous knowledge and coping strategies. They may even be deliberately excluded from decision-making.

The exclusion and attendant poverty of ethnic minorities may force them into settlement in dangerous locations, or to live on land of poor quality that produces little food, while language, educational and cultural barriers can restrict access to information on risk and risk avoidance. Migrants can be doubly vulnerable: as members of minority ethnic groups, they may be neglected or even persecuted; as strangers to an area they lack the knowledge and coping strategies to protect themselves.

Migrant workers may have to take on hazardous jobs where health and safety standards may be poor (especially if they are illegal or unregistered labour). For instance, when Hurricane Georges hit the Dominican Republic in September 1998, many of those swept away by floods and landslides were migrant workers from Haiti. These are a particularly marginal group in the country, living in poor housing and unsafe conditions and facing racial hostility from local people and officials. How many died nobody could say, as so many were unregistered and unable to obtain identity papers.

Ethnic and political or class divisions often overlap. Ethnicity is a significant political factor in many countries, at local and national levels. Ethnic polarisation can result from development programmes that are perceived to favour one community over another. Tensions between communities often appear when aid for relief and recovery is targeted at one particular group. For example, it is common practice to give food aid, tools and household goods to those displaced by disasters, who have lost their possessions, but host communities are likely to feel that they deserve something as compensation, especially if they too have given assistance such as food and shelter.

The displacement of communities in the cause of socio-economic development – forcing them to make way for the construction of large dams, or taking over common land on which animals are grazed or food collected – has become a controversial political issue. Communities that depend heavily on natural resources are highly vulnerable to developments that affect the natural environment. Forcible displacement of ethnic groups for political reasons has been a major factor in civil wars and low-level conflicts within
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States. Both kinds of displacement can make those affected vulnerable to all kinds of external pressures. Mitigation efforts, too, can be wrecked by ethnic politics (see Case Study 6.7) and conflict.

Development and humanitarian work needs to bear such issues in mind. Basing projects on the key principles of non-discrimination and participation is essential. From this, it will be possible to identify particular vulnerabilities and develop appropriate responses.

Case Study 6.7
Ethnicity, politics and mitigation

In February 1976, an earthquake killed 22,000 people in the rural highlands of Guatemala and in squatter settlements in the capital, Guatemala City. In the highlands, NGOs including Oxfam America and World Neighbors supported community-based programmes to build safer houses. Community development and leadership training were important components of this work – indeed, it pioneered community-based approaches to disaster mitigation.

The earthquake rapidly became a political issue in Guatemala and internationally because most of its victims were the rural poor and urban squatters, whilst the middle and upper classes were left almost unscathed. The country’s repressive government was unhappy about these issues being aired, and particularly about initiatives that empowered communities. A number of community workers in the capital and the countryside were murdered.

In the highlands, where the population are largely indigenous Mayan Indians, the situation worsened in the following years with disputes over the expropriation of Indian land. Tens of thousands were killed by the military in the early 1980s, and community leaders and other individuals who had been active in relief and reconstruction work after the earthquake were targeted. Many were killed by the army or fled into exile. Efforts to make communities less vulnerable physically – to earthquakes – had actually made them more vulnerable politically.

In the area of warnings, one important improvement might be to make greater use of minority languages and media in order to ensure that the warnings reach minority communities. In 1985, Aboriginal people living around the town of Alice Springs in Australia were hit much harder by floods than the rest of the population, partly because the radio broadcasts that alerted local people were not on channels normally used by Aborigines.21

The indigenous knowledge and coping strategies of different ethnic groups can be used as a resource. Some tribal and nomadic communities may have considerable experience of coping with stress and crisis, or strong social structures that adapt well to difficult conditions.

6.6 Chapter summary

• Certain groups are particularly vulnerable to disasters: they include people marginalised by gender, age, ethnicity and disability. The root causes of their vulnerability lie in their position in society.
• The needs of such groups are often overlooked by disaster managers, and their voices are rarely heard. There should be more planning with them, not simply for them.
• Women’s skills, technical knowledge and coping capacities are a valuable resource for risk reduction, which should be utilised more extensively.
• Disasters can be used as opportunities to empower women and make significant changes in gender relationships.
• Older people’s knowledge and experience of previous disasters can be put to good use in risk reduction.
• Children and young people should be given more opportunities to present their views of their environment and their needs.
• Institutions such as schools and nurseries can provide a focus for a range of mitigation activities benefiting both children and the community as a whole.
• A number of simple, inexpensive steps can be taken to reduce the physical vulnerability of elderly and disabled people.
• Inclusive, non-discriminatory approaches are needed to overcome minority groups’ vulnerability.

Notes

1 B. Byrne and S. Baden, Gender, Emergencies and Humanitarian Assistance (Brussels: European Commission, 1995); E. Enarson, Gender and Natural Disasters (Geneva: International Labour Office InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction Working Paper 1, 2000); E. Enarson et al., Working with Women at Risk: Practical Guidelines for Communities Assessing Disaster Risk (Miami, FL: Florida International University: International Hurricane Center, 2002);
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3 Enarson, Gender and Natural Disasters, p. 4.


16 Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities (Washington DC: American National Red Cross, 1997), www.redcross.org/services/disaster/beprepared/disability.pdf; P. D. Blanck,

19 Exceptions are P. Blaikie et al., At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 13, 19, 133–34; J. Krishnamurthy, Strengthening the Coping Capacity of Tribal People in the Face of Natural Disasters (Geneva: International Labour Office InFocus Programme, Crisis Response and Reconstruction, 2002).
21 Blaikie et al., At Risk, p. 133.